

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

WASHINGTON POST
19 May 1985

Soldiers Living 'in a Cage'

Soviets Keep Low Profile in E. Germany

By William Drozdiak
Washington Post Foreign Service

WEST BERLIN—In East Germany, they are everywhere—and nowhere.

The 380,000 Soviet troops based in East Germany form the highest concentration of foreign soldiers in any European country. Posted on the front line of the East-West divide, they serve in the vanguard of Moscow's extension of military power, as well as offer insurance for the political legitimacy of local communist authorities.

Yet "the Guards of the Regiment," as Soviet troops in Eastern Bloc states collectively are known, generally are regarded by allies as an unloved occupation force rather than brothers in arms. They are held in scarcely concealed contempt by many East Germans, but discussion of their presence remains an alarming taboo.

They are rarely seen in public, but occasionally, clusters of Soviet soldiers, conspicuous in their brown uniforms and with Slavic or Asian faces, venture out to visit war memorials. Fraternization with the local population, however, is scrupulously avoided.

"The typical Soviet soldier in East Germany lives as if he were in a cage," said Harald Rueddenklau, a Soviet military authority at the German Society for Foreign Policy, a leading West German think tank. "He makes no contact with the East German population, nor do the Germans want any."

In terms of the military calculus of East-West relations, the 20 Soviet divisions in East Germany also present one of the more critical yet enigmatic factors in the amorphous equation known as the European balance of power.

The "Group of Soviet Forces in Germany," their official title, form the Soviet Union's largest and most well-equipped military contingent abroad. The troops in East Germany supposedly are better educated than most Soviet soldiers, and

they are armed with the latest models of tanks, fighter-bombers and helicopters in the Soviet arsenal, according to western intelligence sources and other experts.

In a purported good-will gesture five years ago, Soviet ground forces in East Germany were cut by up to 20,000 troops and 1,000 tanks following a speech by then-Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev marking the 30th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic.

Western intelligence officials said the move was largely cosmetic, because the quantities of troops and weaponry deployed by the Soviets in East Germany still exceed the combined forces of Britain, France and the United States in West Germany.

Despite the sensitive nature of Soviet forces in East Germany, the three western allies have been able to conduct daily patrols, tantamount to legally sanctioned espionage, by their 14-member military liaison missions based in Potsdam, outside East Berlin.

Under 1947 accords regulating occupied Germany, the Soviet Union is allowed to maintain three similar missions accredited to the former American, French and British sectors in what is now West Germany.

As they roam across the German countryside in cars crammed with sophisticated listening devices and infrared cameras, the liaison teams are said to accumulate what is considered the best on-site intelligence available in Central Europe.

The Soviet and western commands declare some areas off-limits to the liaison missions, and last year the commander of Soviet forces in Germany, Gen. Mikhail Zaitsev, expanded the size of forbidden territory to include 40 percent of East Germany.

Such restrictions are not necessarily obeyed, and both Soviet and western units are known to bend the

Continued